

Throughout 2014, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani pursued an assertive foreign policy in the Middle East, providing financial support to Islamist groups in the Palestinian territories, Syria, Egypt, and other countries. However, as the year progressed, diplomatic pressure from other Arab states of the Persian Gulf led to Qatar to decrease its support for such foreign groups.

Large numbers of migrant workers continue to be subjected to slave-like conditions, despite increased attention from the media and human rights groups in the run-up to the 2022 football World Cup being held in Doha.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

### **Political Rights: 10 / 40** [Key]

#### **A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12**

The head of state is the emir, whose family holds a monopoly on political power. The emir appoints the prime minister and cabinet, and also selects an heir-apparent after consulting with the ruling family and other notables. In 2013, Hamad abdicated, handing over power to his fourth-born son, 33-year old Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani, the former head of state security, became prime minister as well as interior minister.

The constitution stipulates that 30 of the 45 seats of the parliament, the Advisory Council (Majlis Al-Shura), be filled through elections every four years; the emir appoints the other 15 members. However, elections for the Advisory Council have yet to take place, so all members are currently appointed. Elections scheduled to take place in 2013 were postponed due to the transfer of power to Tamim. The Advisory Council does not currently have the power to propose legislation, only to propose changes.

The country held its first elections in 1999 for a 29-member Central Municipal Council, a body designed to advise the minister on municipal affairs and agriculture. Its members serve four-year terms. In the most recent Municipal Council elections, held in 2011, 4 of the 101 candidates were women; only one, who was running for reelection, won a seat. Voter turnout was 43 percent, with just 13,606 registered voters participating. The next municipal elections are scheduled for May 2015.

In a 2003 referendum, Qataris overwhelmingly approved the country's first constitution, which came into force in 2005. The new constitution slightly broadened the scope of political participation without eliminating the ruling family's monopoly on power. All Qatari citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote. However, approximately 80 percent of the country's population is composed of foreign workers, who are not eligible to vote.

#### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16**

The government does not permit the existence of political parties. The system is dominated by the ruling family.

## **C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12**

Critics continue to complain of a lack of transparency in government procurement, which favors personal connections. Official information is very tightly controlled and not transparent. However, Qatar was ranked 26 out of 175 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2014, Qatar faced allegations of corrupt practices in securing the winning bid to host the 2022 World Cup. Criticism of the country's labor practices in constructing the infrastructure needed to support the tournament has also grown.

## **Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 3 / 0**

Citizens can petition elected local government representatives with limited powers over municipal services; these representatives report to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Urban Planning.

## **Civil Liberties: 18 / 60**

## **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 8 / 16**

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, both print and broadcast media are influenced by leading families. The top five daily newspapers are privately owned, but their owners and boards include members of the ruling family. In 1996, Hamad permitted the creation of Al Jazeera, which has achieved a global reach. Although it is privately held, the government has reportedly paid for the channel's operating costs since its inception. As a result, Al Jazeera generally does not cover Qatari politics. All journalists in Qatar practice a high degree of self-censorship and face possible jail sentences for slander.

A draft media law approved by the Advisory Council in 2012, proposing wider protections for journalists and their sources but also fines for offenses like criticizing the regime or neighboring governments, remained under consideration in 2014. In September 2014, Qatar's government passed a cybercrimes law with greater restrictions on content posted on social media and news websites. The law prohibits any content spreading "false news" or undermining "general order," subjecting the author to up to three years in prison. Furthermore, the law also prohibits the spread of content that violates "social values" by publishing news, pictures, audio, or video of individuals' "personal or family life;" the author can face up to one year in prison and a fine even if the content is true. The emir had not yet approved the law at year's end. The government censors online content and blocks access to websites that are deemed pornographic or politically sensitive.

Islam is Qatar's official religion, though the constitution explicitly provides for freedom of worship. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs regulates clerical matters and the construction of mosques. Several churches have been built for Qatar's growing Christian community. The constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and academic research, but scholars often self-censor on politically sensitive topics. Several foreign universities have established branches in Qatar under a program to strengthen Qatar's educational institutions.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 2 / 12**

While the constitution grants freedoms of assembly and association, these rights are limited in practice. Protests are rare, with the government restricting the public's ability to organize demonstrations. In November 2014, a group of migrant construction workers assembled to protest low pay and was reportedly confronted by police, who arrested a number of the workers. All nongovernmental organizations need state permission to operate, and the government closely monitors their activities. There are no independent human rights organizations, but a government-appointed National Human Rights Committee, which includes members of civil society and government ministries, investigates alleged abuses.

A 2005 labor law expanded some worker protections, but the rights to form unions and to strike remain restricted. The only trade union allowed to operate is the General Union of Workers of Qatar, which prohibits the membership of noncitizens and government-sector employees.

## **F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16**

Despite constitutional guarantees, the judiciary is not independent in practice. The majority of Qatar's judges are foreign nationals who are appointed and removed by the emir. The judicial system consists of Sharia (Islamic law) courts, which have jurisdiction over a narrow range of issues including family law, and civil law courts, which have jurisdiction over criminal, commercial, and civil cases. Although the constitution protects individuals from arbitrary arrest and detention and bans torture, a 2002 law allows the suspension of these guarantees for the "protection of society." The law empowers the minister of the interior to detain a defendant for crimes related to national security on the recommendation of the director-general of public security.

The two-year criminal case against Grace and Matthew Huang concluded in November 2014, when both were acquitted of child endangerment stemming from the death of their eight-year-old daughter, whom they had adopted from Ghana prior to moving to Qatar. The Huangs were originally arrested on suspicion of murder and human trafficking, with the prosecutor calling into question their motives in adopting a child of a different race.

The Penal Code punishes same-sex sexual activity with imprisonment, and Sharia law, which applies only to Muslims, prohibits any sexual acts outside of marriage. Same-sex relationships must be hidden in public.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16**

Qataris face no apparent restrictions on freedom of movement within Qatar or on type or place of employment. Such freedoms, however, are not extended to noncitizens and foreign workers. Qataris are also permitted to own property and start private businesses, although the process of obtaining necessary commercial permits can be cumbersome.

The constitution treats women as full and equal persons, and gender-based discrimination is banned. Emir Tamim appointed a female minister for communication and information technology in 2013; she is the third-ever female minister in Qatar. In 2006, Qatar implemented a codified family law to regulate issues

such as inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. While this law expands protections for women, they continue to face disadvantages, including societal discrimination, and have few effective legal mechanisms to contest incidents of bias.

Domestic violence is not criminalized and is prevalent. The Qatar Foundation for Child and Woman Protection (QFCWP) has noted a significant increase in cases of violence since 2004. The 2011–2016 National Development Strategy includes measures to better protect victims of abuse, including laws against domestic violence, increased legal protections for victims, and robust social support services. In 2013, the government reorganized multiple social services organizations, including the QFPWC, putting them under the purview of the Qatar Foundation for Social Work. The QFPWC operates a shelter for abused women and children and, in cooperation with the public prosecutor's office, facilitates the legal response to cases of abuse. However, it is unclear how many domestic abuse charges were filed in 2014. Qatar is a destination for the trafficking of men and women, particularly for forced labor and prostitution.

While the constitution prohibits discrimination based on nationality, the government discriminates against noncitizens in the areas of education, housing, healthcare, and other services that are offered free of charge to citizens. Foreign nationals comprise more than 80 percent of the country's population and over 90 percent of the workforce, and most rights do not apply to noncitizen residents. Under Qatar's *kafala* system, many foreign workers face economic abuses, including the withholding of salaries or contract manipulation, while others endure poor living conditions and excessive work hours. However, fear of job loss and deportation often prevents them from exercising their limited rights. Female domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Migrants working to build the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup continue to work in terrible conditions. There have been reports of workers not receiving wages for more than a year and being stranded in Qatar after the collapse of their contracting company. The government announced in May 2014 that the labor system would be reformed, but no substantial details were provided by year's end.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**